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# SOCIETIES FOR MINDING ONE'S OWN BUSINESS.

BY ELIZABETH BISLAND.

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ALMOST every time the postman whistles at the door of those who have the habit of giving, he hands in one or more appeals for aid. These appeals come from the managers of Boys' Clubs, from Children's Aid Societies, Societies for Improving the Condition of the Poor, from churches, missions, crèches, free kindergartens, hospitals; from societies fighting tuberculosis, fighting vice, crime, poverty, ignorance and injustice. There appears to be no ill that flesh or spirit inherits that has not been recognized, charted, studied: none that brave and unselfish human beings have not banded together to abolish or ameliorate. Every resource of science, every discovery of medicine, of psychology, of industrial progress, is laid under contribution to solve the current problems of society. Very nearly every member of society contributes something, either in personal effort or money, and many give freely of both.

There is one feature of this universal war against ignorance, wrong and pain that seems not to have received sufficient attention. The war is waged in the cities. And the cities grow and grow by arithmetical progression. Every decade shows an enormous increase of this clotting of the population into urban environment, despite heroic endeavors to replace the people on the land, to colonize, to distribute many of the juvenile victims of its untoward influences among the farming population. Every decade demonstrates the irresistible centripetal forces sweeping back again into the streets the people charitably deported, and drawing to the cities those who were born and bred to rural life. Thin rills flow out, huge rushing streams of life pour in and the balance never turns countrywards. This problem of

the congestion of population has not escaped notice and many explanations and remedies are suggested, none of which have seemed to reach the root of the matter.

Some few here and there, however, are beginning to suspect that the very means taken to attenuate the results of this human swarming, only succeed in increasing the conflux. Perhaps the individual emigrant to the town does not define the instinct that draws him to the buzzing hives of men, but the pull of instinct is always toward the centres in which the conditions of life are easiest. From the tragic stories of want, overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, high rents, excessive cost of living, with all the resultant stunting and disease, one would not imagine these crowded centres of population would present a suggestion of ease, but the efforts of the charitable and of the social worker have the result of bringing about this impression. Illness from the cities' untoward influences is more probable in the towns, but one is in close touch with hospitals, with free dispensaries, with district nurses, with chemists—with all the means of mitigating bodily distress. The sick in countryside neighborhoods have ordinarily to depend upon unskilled friends or members of the patient's family for attendance, and, unable to command free medical aid, are driven to experiment with the ubiquitous patent drugs. No Boys' Clubs offer costly gymnastic appliances, talking-machines, moving-pictures, lectures or games to the farmer's son. He must drowse or squabble in the kitchen, or sneak away to the cross-roads grocery to eavesdrop at the endless dull gossip of the rural loafers. The country girl is not provided with the dances and music of the Girl's Friendlies, or the classes in type-writing, dressmaking, millinery or cooking of the Y. W. C. A.'s. The overdriven country mother cannot have her troublesome babies cared for at a crèche, or amused at a kindergarten while she faces the long days of her extreme toil. The child in the country school cannot benefit by free dentistry, free care from oculists, has no manual training in his preparation for life-work. The laborer in the soil has no means of raising the suddenly needed loan by pledging his property at the kindly provident loan society, or even with a less amiable pawnbroker. The country church asks insistently for contributions to support its feeble life instead of dispensing the alms of richer members in the nourishing and aiding of its poorer parishioners.

The amusements are sparse and expensive in the country, the means of cultivation for eager minds are hard to come by, and in the face of such conditions it is natural that the rural population tends more and more to the centres where in ever-increasing volume provision for the needs of human beings is eagerly poured out by willing hands and purses, heroically endeavoring to supply all wants, make up all personal deficiencies.

Of what use is it to preach the evils of overcrowding, to vaunt the value of air and space to the eager girl and boy yearning for life, for opportunity, for amusement? Of what use to tell the parents that three generations of city life sap the vigor of the family? They are not the third generation. If the grandchildren are threatened with anæmia and stunting by urban life let *them* go back to the soil. The man and the woman want to live *now*, and they are more hopeful of getting what they need in their own time by moving into the radius of that incessant shower of interest and beneficence that gushes like a fountain from the kindly hearts of the town.

It is not that the country hearts are less kind, but the power of the many is so much larger than that of the few. A thousand dimes are so much greater in sum and efficiency than the dollar of one. It is useless to labor to hold back from the place where so much pleasure and help is to be had those who need pleasure and help.

This truth is becoming evident to a few, and those who are awaking to it are instituting a much-needed change of philanthropic base. They have been awakened to the necessity of a decentralizing movement in social effort. Instead of joining the cry of "back to the soil," they are pondering means to keep their neighbors on the soil by transplanting to it what the human plants need. They are plucking up courage to shut their hearts to the poignant cries for aid from the victims of the cities, and are devoting their energies to lessening the supply of the victims who so cruelly need that aid.

The first step in this new social effort is to recognize that in the country some of the advantages of the city must be afforded. The next, that concerted effort can achieve more than is within the power of any individual, and that the banded efforts of the countryside rightly applied will secure for the dwellers there the most desirable opportunities of city life.

These leagues have been called by various names, but perhaps the most proper title would be "Societies for Minding Our Own Business." One early member of a neighborhood league thus defined the appositeness of this subtitle: "What is our own business? Why, to see that our taxes are properly spent; that the elected officials do their duty; that our roads are kept in order; the public health guarded; the laws obeyed; the schools maintained at a high standard; the beauty of the countryside preserved and increased, and that every one of us has an opportunity for healthful pleasure."

To which definition one of the women members added, crisply: "It's just good housekeeping on a larger scale. To keep one's house economically, to see that it's clean, wholesome, pretty and agreeable, and that the children are educated, is what every self-respecting woman among us is giving her energies to. Keeping the neighborhood is just a part of it, for the individual home is dependent on the neighborhood being well kept for its health, for comfort, beauty and for education. Attending to all this is certainly minding our own business."

Two communities, near New York City, with this idea in mind have formed leagues which include every local man, woman and child who is willing to work towards these ends; the wealthy summer residents, the local merchants, the clergy, the school-teachers, men and women of all trades and occupations, day-laborers and the children. The membership is divided into three classes: those paying twenty-five dollars in yearly dues, ten dollars and one dollar, but all three classes having equal voting rights and being eligible for office. Practically every member is an official, for the entire association is divided into committees on Membership, on Law and Order, Lights and Roads, Health and Cleanliness, Education, Libraries, Amusements and Neighborhood Improvement. Each committee works for its special object, but reports to the whole body and so dovetails its work into the efforts of the other committees as to make "one hand wash the other." As, for example, the committees on Health and Cleanliness, Law and Order, Lights and Roads, and Neighborhood Improvement combine in the work of seeing that the highways are well maintained and lighted, that they are kept clean, wayside trees planted and preserved, and that users of the highways are forced to observe the speed laws and rules of the

road. The various committees again come together in keeping a supervision of the drinking-water and the ventilation of the schools, beautifying the school and library grounds, and making the library a centre for educational lectures, for musical and literary clubs, games and moving-picture shows, and talks on hygienic matters.

Convinced that the taxes paid, if honestly and economically administered, would make many local improvements possible which they now lacked, the leagues undertook to maintain a voluntary supervision of public works and expenditures with some very enlightening results. As one member expressed it: "If you paid your butcher for ten pounds of meat, and he only delivered two and a half, you'd be considered a feeble fool if you submitted to it, and yet that's what we're all doing about our taxes."

The local politicians were inclined to take a high tone at first with the Leagues' Committees, but on having presented to them a list of the voters enrolled in the association, they assumed a more conciliatory attitude, and a prompt enforcement of many neglected laws ensued, and money was found to be available for a number of necessary improvements.

Both of these leagues have founded and supported excellent libraries through local efforts and without appealing for outside aid. These are free to all the members, and the aim is to make them centres of the neighborhood's development. To make their grounds a model of the possibilities of beauty that can be achieved at small expense by the means of neatness and taste in gardening and planting. To use them as meeting-places for the local clubs, literary societies, singing-schools and musical societies, and for the encouragement of reading and study among the school children. For their support and development the local ball clubs charge admission to their games, dances are given, fairs and rummage sales held.

One of the leagues established a kindergarten where the busy country mothers could send their children "to be out from under their feet" during the pressure of morning work, assured of their being happy and cared for and receiving training and development in many ways. And the other turned its energies towards the development of manual training in the public schools.

A trained nurse has been hired by the year to give skilled

assistance in illness to those who cannot afford to pay for such costly needs, and—incidentally—to teach a thousand needed lessons in hygiene and preventive medicine. It is hoped that eventually a small cottage hospital may grow up where prompt and not costly aid may save many who find it difficult to leave home in search of help from the great institutions in the city.

One committee compelled an abandonment of the deposit of sewage and garbage in local waters. Forced a new cleanliness in the care of cesspools; encouraged the burning of all waste matter; inaugurated a mosquito crusade and screening against the deadly house-fly. Another fitted up an old beach cottage as a bathing pavilion, where all the members might benefit, in cleanliness, comfort and safety, by their nearness to the health-giving salt baths. Seeds were distributed to the school children, and prizes were offered for the neatest and most successful cottage gardens. A permanent sales centre of local handiwork was instituted at one of the libraries, where orders could be given for any work desired. The larger gardens contributed their superfluous vegetables and fruit for the support of the libraries, insuring the supply of cheap, fresh and wholesome food at moderate prices for those without gardens. The libraries also served in a measure as local intelligence offices.

This is but a very slight outline of the efforts and the hopes of these societies for minding their own pressing and urgent business. Perhaps their greatest value has been in their social influence.

In all democracies the barriers between human beings are far wider and more rigid than in aristocratic countries. Where no differences are authorized the individual protects himself with far more sternness and impatience, and however the orator may prate in America of equality, every candid person is aware that the check-book divides man and man more completely than does the book of the Peerage.

In these leagues the teacher, the carpenter, the fisherman and the Italian "dago" meet in committees in the banker's or broker's or publisher's parlor to concert for the general good of the community. The butcher discovers, to his surprise, that the banker is a kindly neighbor, fond of telling funny stories, and free with his cigars when once he has broken through his shyness. The broker is equally pleased to discover how well-mannered, shrewd

and able is the man who reroofed his house, and the publisher's wife finds the wife of her friend's gardener a sympathetic companion who likes the same novels and has the same views on bringing up children as she herself.

There is no need of settlement work here. Each leads his life as before, but gains a new respect and liking for his neighbors, a new understanding of the points of view, the difficulties, the hopes and aims of his fellow men and women. It was shown by the bringing together of the community that most of its richer members were contributing money and personal labor to help the poor of New York City, and yet rarely became aware of the illness and poverty at their own doors.

The leaders in this new movement hope to see it grow, and look forward to a not very distant day when every county will have its dozen or more leagues, all uniting to send delegates to a central county committee. They look forward to, in this way, purifying local government and checking the headlong flow of all charity and philanthropic efforts to the cities, and the consequent and inevitable drift of the people to where it is to be found. They have heard so much of the "reconcentrado camps" of the cities, with their attendant horrors, that they have begun humbly, but hopefully, to inaugurate a deconcentrado movement. They are convinced that that there would be less need for minding other people's business if there was an earnest and concerted effort to mind our own. That by this concerted effort it will be possible to bring to the rural communities very many of the pleasures, the aids and the opportunities offered by the cities. That instead of telling the people to go back to the land, it is better to so enlarge the scope of life upon the land that they will not wish to leave it.

ELIZABETH BISLAND.